Research Article

Aspirations and Contestations: ICT Training and Subjectivities Among Marginalized Youth

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Abstract

My ethnographic research in the urban peripheries of New Delhi critically examines a popular, ICT-led skills training initiative for marginalized youth. Contemporary policy discourses in India emphasize the urgency for "training" versus "education" to prepare an efficient workforce trained for India's emerging, global economy. I argue that marginalized youth form critical subjects of these ICTD projects. Contrary to the aims of the training initiatives, participants continue to prioritize and press for an education. Their claim is an assertion of equality with more privileged individuals based on their experiences of a lack of access to familial, institutional, and linguistic privileges. I demonstrate that students' narratives disrupt the policy emphasis on consumption and hygiene, and point to deeper structural inequities in their lives. My research highlights the contradictions of ICTD programs and the limitations of the promise of inclusion for marginalized youth in the global economy.

On a Saturday morning in summer, a group of young people were gathered at the ITIT Yojana skills training center in the Begumpur neighborhood, located in the southern part of New Delhi. Saturday mornings were reserved for class drills. Two groups of 10, young men and women, sat across from each other in a first-floor room of a small house. The instructor had written "S _ _ r" on the chalkboard, and the teams were challenged to fill in the two missing letters. One student, Vaibhav Chauhan, wrote *Soor,* the Hindi word for tune. The room erupted with friendly laughter. Other exercises included writing out the words for the abbreviations HTTP, URL, and HTML. Sarita Ahlawat was part of the team on the left and participated in the games with enthusiasm. She had joined the data entry program at the skills training center. She planned to apply for an entry-level data operator job for the large state-sponsored *Aadhaar* program (also called the Unique Identification Number [UID] program), which collects and stores biometric and demographic information and assigns a unique number to every citizen.

Classified as an urban village, Begumpur shows uneven development. Its one-room tenements attract migrant workers and their families. Valmiki Camp, an informal settlement in Begumpur, suffers from lack of access to clean drinking water, a sewage system, proper roads, and other infrastructure. The more prosperous parts of Begumpur consist of multistoried houses that are home to extended families. Begumpur borders the neighborhood of Malviya Nagar, which includes gated enclaves, shopping malls, and private schools for the elite young residents of Delhi.

On a narrow lane in the relatively prosperous part of Begumpur that borders Malviya Nagar is the Yojana center, which is run by International Training Institute (ITIT), recognized as the global leader in IT education. The Yojana centers, located in several Delhi neighborhoods, offer IT and "soft skills" classes to urban marginalized youth to prepare them to join India's rapidly globalizing economy in service sector and retail jobs in the automobile sales, healthcare, hospitality, and telecommunications industries. Soft skills classes at the ITIT

centers include lessons in speaking English, customer "courtesy" and interactions, and hygiene. In March 2008, ITIT initiated the Yojana centers to offer skills training to marginalized youth at a minimal charge. The Yojana program was started under the aegis of a registered nonprofit organization called the ITIT Foundation, whose aim is to work with "employable youth" from poor urban communities. Specifically, the Yojana program targets urban youth who are perceived to be ill-prepared by conventional education systems to gain productive employment. An aggressive recruitment drive by the Yojana centers ensures that the program attracts at least 20–25 students each month. The ITIT Yojana program claims to charge the urban youth a nominal fee of 900 INR (approximately US$20) for four months of training.

Like the Begumpur center, Madanpur Khadar is a prominent skills training center established by ITIT. In 2015 it was one of the oldest centers among the 12 Yojana centers in Delhi. Khadar is located next to the elite enclave of Sarita Vihar. Known as "one of the ugly faces tucked away in [Delhi's] innards" (Jha, 2012, p. 1), Khadar is a "resettlement colony" that houses thousands of families who were "resettled" there when they were evicted from their homes in some of Delhi's other urban slums.

The Yojana centers follow a similar layout. Both the Khadar and Begumpur centers are located on narrow lanes in better-off neighborhoods. The centers are situated in small houses that consist of a reception space, a bathroom, and two or three medium-sized rooms that are used as classrooms. One classroom contains several PC desktop computers, and all the rooms have wall-mounted flat-screen monitors. Posters display recruitment opportunities with prominent corporations through "placement tie-ups" with Tata Retail and Teleservices, Spice BPO Service, Aegis, McDonald's, Pizza Hut, and others.

More than half of India's 1.2 billion people are estimated to be under the age of 25. As India emerges as an exemplar of technology-led modernization in the Global South, the fate of its capacity to become an economic powerhouse is understood to depend on the future of its unemployed youth. *Bloomberg Business* stated, "If [India's unemployed youth] have jobs, then the whole world wins" (Pradhan, 2015, p. 1). In July 2015, the new Hindu nationalist Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched the Skill India campaign that promoted the burgeoning skills training programs and introduced new training initiatives. ITIT supported Modi's Skill India initiative, proclaiming ITIT's success in training millions of Indians for the IT industry and publicly committing to train another 10 million Indian youth in the next five years to create a "job ready workforce for the country." In India's global economy, training is considered distinctly different from a university education. In his August 15, 2014 address to the nation during its Independence Day celebration, Modi referred to dismantling the existing "archaic system" in the nation to create a skilled labor force of young people. His speech mirrored policy discourse in the last decade that has emphasized the urgency of training versus education for marginalized youth.

In contemporary India, IT is regarded as a leveling force that will usher in modernization and dismantle traditional barriers of class, caste, gender, religion, etc. In his 2005 book, *The World Is Flat,* Thomas Friedman observes that IT enables a "flattening" of the world by leveling global inequities. Popular representations of technology-led development in the Global South include close-up photos of veiled Bangladeshi women sitting in front of computers, of young smiling children wearing headphones and sitting in front of shiny laptops in Nigeria, and a young girl sitting in a bullock cart with a laptop on her lap in rural India.

ICT-based skills training for dispossessed youth is widely celebrated in policy discourse and it is emerging as an important aspect of ICTD (information and communication technologies for development) initiatives in India. Modi emphasized that skills training programs for marginalized youth would be a "war to end poverty." Research on personality development and skills programs for India's new economy has mainly focused on middle-class youth, and the site of inquiry has been the call center (Basi, 2009; Pal & Buzzanell, 2008; Patel, 2010). There is relatively little research on urban skills training projects directed at marginalized youth who live in the urban peripheries of global cities (Sarkar, 2016, 2017).

Burgeoning ICT skills programs have commonly been studied from "above" in policy research (Goel, 2011; Pandya-Wagh, 2015). My ethnographic research in New Delhi asks how popular skill-building initiatives are read and interpreted from "below" by marginalized youth. Based on ethnographic observations and interviews, I examine the contradictions inherent in the promise of the ICTD program in terms of the daily lived realities of urban, marginalized residents. My research argues for going beyond the concerns of the digital divide

to examine how marginalized individuals understand the significance of ICT access in their lives. Contrary to state and corporate discourse on the significance of low-level skills training for employment in the global economy, the students understand that this inclusion is shaped not by mere access to new technologies, but by more deeply rooted privileges of cultural capital such as familial, institutional, and linguistic privileges. Therefore, the students attended the technological skills programs, but continued to ask for a more holistic education that would place them on a par with their elite counterparts. Moreover, the students realize that the intense lessons in English and hygiene not only did not level the playing field in terms of employment, but that these lessons placed the onus on the students themselves for working their way out of poverty and deflected attention from deep-rooted, structural discrimination that includes the state's role in slum evictions and the private sector's disdain for hiring youth from the urban peripheries. My ethnographic research disrupts these linear and celebratory narratives of technology-led societal change in "emerging India."

The Contradictions of ICT Training

Since the creation of the Millennium Development Goals in 2000, India has emerged as the poster child for information and communication technologies for development initiatives, variously known as ICTD, ICT for D, ICT4D, etc. ICTs contain the promise of "leapfrogging for developing countries" by "bypassing some of the processes of accumulation of human capabilities and fixed investment in order to narrow the gaps in productivity and output that separate industrialized and developing countries" (Steinmueller, 2001, p. 2). In the last decade, research on ICT-led development initiatives in India and the Global South has argued that access to ICTs will ensure societal inclusion and economic transformations for marginalized groups (Garai & Shadrach, 2000; Hafkin & Huyer, 2006; Kochhar & Dhanjal, 2005; Ng & Mitter, 2005; Steinmueller, 2001).

In recent years critical, ethnographic, and feminist scholarship in the Global North and South has argued for understanding ICT-led development beyond the issues of access, and for understanding it in the larger context of political-economic structures and complex identities. While the digital divide is concerned with ICT access, *digital inequality* implies going beyond access to encompass the differential benefits (derived from access to the Internet and computers) that are shaped by marginalization and exclusion (Kvasny, 2007; Robinson, 2009). For example, in the United States, poverty, illiteracy, temporary work, and racial and ethnic identities shape ICT diffusion rates and patterns (Kvasny, 2007; Robinson, 2009). Ethnographic work on ICTD initiatives in the Global South and India has demonstrated that these initiatives can strengthen the deep divisions of gender, class, and caste, and even create new inequalities (Chakravartty, 2007; Sarkar, 2016, 2017; Schwittay, 2008; Sreekumar, 2007).

The proliferating ICT skills training programs in India emphasize computer skills, conversational English with the "correct accent," and attire and hygiene. The emphasis on acquiring these skills can be understood as training to acquire cultural capital that can broadly be understood as linguistic competencies, deportment, and tastes (Bourdieu & Nice, 1980). *Cultural capital* is inherited or acquired, usually from the family, and can be transmitted across generations. *Linguistic capital* includes expertise and comfort with the language and self-presentation used by dominant social groups that possess power and status. According to Bourdieu, in the case of the labor market, institutionalization performs a function for cultural capital similar to that performed by money in the case of economic capital. For individuals with roughly similar credentials and training, an educational pedigree like an Ivy League degree can translate into a distinct advantage in the labor market. Education systems legitimate familial and cultural privilege, perpetuating social divisions and inequalities. Access to cultural capital shapes and constrains inclusion for marginalized communities, even after they cross the digital divide (Kvasny, 2007; Robinson, 2009).

As India is recognized as one of the largest emerging economies in the world, ICTs' powerful promise to level inequalities is upheld by its globally recognized IT industry. Computers continue to hold deep symbolic value for economic and social mobility among the rural poor (Pal, Lakshmanan, & Toyama, 2009). The IT industry has consistently rejected the introduction of reservations in the private sector for Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) groups that have historically been considered the bottom of India's caste hierarchy. Instead, the industry has argued for encouraging "merit" through voluntary affirmative action skills training

programs that prepare marginalized individuals to participate in the global economy through IT-ITES (information technology–enabled services) work (Sarkar, 2017). However, ethnographic and critical research on the Indian IT industry demonstrates that it reproduces privileges of class, caste, and gender through its employment practices. The IT industry values soft skills such as appearance, English-speaking skills, and the "right" accent. The emphasis on soft skills, however, acts as a filter for individuals from lower-class and caste positions who lack access to familial and institutional privilege (Fuller & Narasimhan, 2006, 2007; Upadhya, 2007; Upadhya & Vasavi, 2006). While ITES employees earn high salaries and live independently, their "work entails a lifestyle and results in the imbrication of the worker into a cycle of materiality" (Vasavi, 2008, p. 225). Youth workers enter the circuits of global consumerism when they visit bars, discos, international food chain restaurants, and international clothing and brand shops (Vasavi, 2008).

While ICTD initiatives claim to offer economic and social transformations for marginalized communities, these projects may be experienced in complex and contradictory ways in the lives of individuals who experience development policy from "below." In her work on television and state programming targeted at development in Egypt, postcolonial scholar Abu-Lughod (2005) demonstrates how marginalized subjects actively select, interpret, and evaluate modernizing messages in the context of their lives. Importantly, other political and social forces such as kinship, social relations in the city, and new forms of piety shape how citizens relate to development messages. Individual claims for technological advancement in the Global South can be understood as not merely copying western modernity or mental colonization, but as overcoming "categorical subordination" of being perceived as underdeveloped or unequal subjects by their western counterparts (Ferguson, 2006, p. 20).

The impacts of ICTD initiatives in India have been mainly studied through survey research that focuses on access. The purpose of my research is not to examine political, economic, and cultural factors that impede marginalized participants from meaningfully using technology (Garai & Shadrach, 2006; Hafkin & Huyer, 2006; Kochhar & Dhanjal, 2005). Rather, my research examines how ICT access impacts the lived realities of marginalized communities after their participation in the ICTD initiative. Studies of technology and modernization have been predominantly conducted at rural sites in South Asia, where the slogan "Bring ICT to Every Village" has gained popularity. Despite being the capital city that houses several major IT firms and corporate development projects, Delhi has been understudied in the ICTD literature.

Following the work of feminist and critical ethnographers of globalization and media (Abu-Lughod, 2005; Abu-Lughod, Ginsburgh, & Larkin, 2002; Mankekar, 1999; Mazzarella, 2003; Rajagopal, 2001), my multimethod study of this case includes in-depth participation observation, interviews, and media analysis of publicity materials to study interconnected institutions, markets, and communities in Delhi in 2014–2016. Gurumurthy and Singh (2005) argue that it is vital for activists and feminists to engage in critical responses to information societies in the Global South in the context of growing inequities. I used a semistructured interview format and a voice recorder to interview 30 participants, including ITIT instructors and students, in the summers of 2014 and 2016 and the winter of 2015. I developed the semistructured interview protocol for my research at these two sites in Khadar and Begumpur based on my sustained multi-sited fieldwork in 2008–2009 for a larger project on the institutional and cultural politics of ICT training projects for youth in Delhi's urban peripheries. Subsequently, I modified this field protocol in Khadar and Begumpur during a month of preliminary grounded research in 2014. As Parthasarathy and Srinivasan (2006) write about ICTD projects, a sustained period of ethnographic research inspires more trust, reciprocity, and sharing of experiences from participants. Importantly, these field interactions help us understand the power dynamics and contestations within which these projects are inevitably embedded. The locations for these interviews included the neighborhood ITIT centers, homes, street corners, workplaces, and chai shops. Further, I engaged in participant observation and took extensive field notes at these sites.

I transcribed the interviews, which were in Hindi (in which I am fluent), and based on my embodied position in the field. I placed my extensive field notes and interviews into categories and then coded them through several close readings (Lindlof & Taylor, 2012). After several sessions of close reading and coding, I found that several occurrences in the data related to each other. These high-inference categories, which assimilated several pieces of evidence, were drawn from researcher, insider knowledge, and embodiment in the field (Lindlof

& Taylor, 2012). These themes, or categories, revealed contradictions in the ICTD discourse, for example, the demand for education formed a recurring category in the students' responses that contradicted the policy emphasis on training. Similarly, students' narratives about the state's neglect of the slums and of evictions were juxtaposed with the training discourse that emphasized a stylish, hygienic individual. In keeping with the qualitative and interpretivist research on ICTD initiatives, my study retains these contradictions and contestations in the participants' lives (Burrell & Toyama, 2009). The ethnographic material revealed the limitations and contradictions of the ICTD discourse that could be understood through critical research on IT-led development, specifically, theoretical discussions related to cultural capital and interpretive subjects.

Amid the optimism in policy circles about ICTs as a leveling force for marginalized communities, it is vital to ask: How are these development programs experienced by subaltern or urban poor individuals in their everyday lives? Do they read the modernizing messages of the state in consonance with the program discourse, or do they bring differing or contradictory understandings of the goals of the ICTD initiatives? Do these programs stimulate a leveling of economic and social inequities for marginalized youth?

Claiming an Education, Not Training

> Eventually education will only take you so far. We have kids who cannot apply that education because they do not have the skills to be employed.[1]

The short courses at the ITIT centers emphasized skills training to transform low-income youth into global workers. Skills training included both basic ICT courses and soft skills training. ICT courses focused on producing retail associates, customer service representatives, and front desk staff in the banking and financial services industries. Significantly, the courses' soft skills components consisted of training low-income students in cultural capital skills such as speaking English and lessons on personal hygiene such as wearing clean clothes, taking daily baths, and exhibiting acceptable body language in the corporate workplace. In this section, I demonstrate that Yojana students formed critical subjects, who interpreted the skills training program in the context of their daily lives. They resisted the program's discourse on training and asked for a rounded general education on par with their more privileged peers.

Narendra Modi, in his 2014 Independence Day address, distinguished between individuals who generate jobs and those with "dexterity of their hands." Atul Bhatnagar, the COO of the National Skills Development Corporation, a public body for policy decisions at the national level about skills training initiatives, declared that "there is a clear mismatch of supply and demand of labor due to lack of technical and soft skills and inappropriate education system" (2015, p. 1). Bhatnagar further asserted that "young Indians must focus on skill development, not just earning degrees" (2015, p. 1). ITIT's promotional videos state that skills training programs are the best way to convert India's surplus working population, estimated to be 40–50 million by 2020, into an effective workforce for BPO, IT services, and IT infrastructure management industries. Ritu Agarwal, a soft skills trainer at ITIT Yojana, claimed that the goal of the training program was to enable the maximum number of youth to become human resource capital by working efficiently at their jobs. Manish Mitter, an instructor at ITIT Begumpur, told his students, "Getting a job is not possible when you are just a graduate from college. We teach you practical skills here so you can achieve your goals and earn money." However, the difference between the program's emphasis on training and the Yojana students' call for an education was revealed in their day-to-day lives.

Sushil Raut was a graduate of ITIT's computer skills training program in the state of Madhya Pradesh, and his abilities facilitated his rise to the position of center head for the Khadar center, where his job involved managing finances, operations, and career opportunities for students. Raut belonged to the Scheduled Caste historically considered to be at the bottom of India's caste hierarchy. His father had been employed as a peon, or office attendant, at a state-run secondary school in the Chhindwara district of Madhya Pradesh.

However, Raut struggled to complete his Master's program in Social Work in Delhi. Subsequently, he enrolled in a doctoral program in Indore, the largest city in Madhya Pradesh. He undertook the arduous

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1. Bose, director, ITIT Foundation, personal communication, August 1, 2014.

journey each weekend from Delhi to Indore. His train journey, each way, took about 15 hours in an unreserved carriage, which meant that he could not often sleep on the train. Each Sunday he attended classes from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. and returned to Delhi on the 6 p.m. train. ITIT supported Raut and permitted him to leave early each Saturday. His thesis focused on finding effective means of sharing information about the state's existing social service programs with rural residents of the Chhindwara district. Raut felt his doctorate would bestow status and prestige on him as well as possible employment opportunities with the state government or a university. After three years of working at ITIT, he left his position to return to Chhindwara, citing family responsibilities. Although IT training had proved to be a more productive and easier path for him in terms of providing a living and a better life, he struggled against the odds to acquire an education and not simply training.

Nitin Gupta was a 19-year-old youth who completed ITIT's short course in data entry in Khadar, which included learning several data entry software systems. Gupta found a customer service job at Reliance Fresh, a grocery store chain owned by Mukesh Ambani, India's richest man. Gupta worked with billing and customer support. He eventually left his job because his employers would not grant him leave to attend his brother's wedding. Subsequently, Gupta started a three-year Bachelor's program in computer application at a university, which was a more sustained course of study and involved paying steep fees that he and his family struggled to pay. At the time of my fieldwork in 2016, Gupta was in his first year of the program.

Many students at the Begumpur and Khadar centers asked to receive a more holistic education. In Khadar, there were three government-run schools. The classrooms often had more than 70 students per class without capable teachers (Puri & Bhatia, 2009). There were private schools, but they were more expensive than the government's schools. Begumpur's senior secondary public school suffered from overcrowding and a lack of access to an acceptable standard of general education. Neither neighborhood had a college. For several students, coming to the ICT center felt like going to college, and they asked for a more general education and English lessons. According to Seema Singh at the Begumpur center:

> Coming to the Yojana center is like coming to college for me because I spend a lot of time here taking classes or working at the computers. I have been asking my teachers here to teach more English and also subjects like math and history.[2]

In English classes, students read titles such as *Treasure Island, Pinocchio,* and *Alice in Wonderland* and Nancy Drew books. They looked up words like "seafaring," "woodcarver," and "puppet" in the dictionary. Reading *Treasure Island* raised questions of maps and travels among students. Alok Arar and Samina Ali, two students at the Khadar center, asked for geography and history lessons that their friends were getting at a South Delhi college.

Even when ITIT participants pursued a university education, they realized their limitations. While Veena Johar at Khadar enjoyed her studies through the distance learning program, she emphasized the differences between a university degree from one of the better-known colleges in Delhi University versus a distance learning degree. Additionally, she pointed to the differences in acquiring a BA pass degree versus the more prestigious BA (honors) degree. While both degrees usually require three years of coursework, the BA pass degree is often labeled as BA General, which usually disadvantages students from pursuing a graduate education.

Meeza Bano, a 20-year-old woman who lived in Khadar, was pursuing ICT training. Her father was a migrant who had worked as a wall painter. He had to give up his temporary job because of his advanced age and illness. Bano joined the training program because she wanted to help her family cope with the loss of her father's income. According to Bano:

> If the group discussion or interview gives us a topic we haven't memorized, we will not be able to do well. I have studied in a government school, and we do not get the same facilities as a private school. The moment we open our mouths to speak, the interviewer knows where we come from even if we are dressed well.[3]

Similarly, Arnab Sen was a migrant youth from the city of Kolkata. His family had moved to Delhi in search of better jobs and higher salaries, and they lived in the Jhuggi Jhopri slum settlement in Khadar. Sen had

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2. *Seema Singh, personal communication, August 5, 2016.*
3. *Meeza Bano, personal communication, September 1, 2014.*

completed a BA program in the state of West Bengal two months earlier and had joined a computer operator training program. He was unclear about the job opportunities after he completed the program:

> We can only speak English here at the center. We cannot speak it at home because our parents do not know English. If our education is not good, we will not be able to move forward. There is no point in giving us English and computer lessons.[4]

Bano had heard about Modi's skills training program for youth and his allied Make in India program, but voiced her skepticism about celebrations of India's prosperity for all individuals:

> The common people were previously poor and they are still poor. And expenses are the same or rising for us. All these companies like Costa Coffee are international. So, if Modi-ji gets companies from outside, we need to have degrees from good colleges and know good English and not only do skills training courses.[5]

Sen's and Bano's declarations pointed to the contradictions between the promise and the reality of skills training programs. Bano realized that without familial, institutional, and linguistic privilege, her access to employment and mobility would be severely limited. Her critique of the program is supported by research that finds the IT industry privileges upper-class and -caste individuals from elite educational institutions (Fuller & Narasimhan, 2006, 2007; Upadhya, 2007; Upadhya & Vasavi, 2006). Modi's Make in India program invites foreign and domestic capital into India with state protection. His regime has been criticized for catering to international and Indian elites and for generating jobs that do not include labor protection or adequate wages, further increasing societal inequalities (Vakulabharanam, 2015).

The students at the Yojana centers interpreted the modernization messages of the ICTD program based on their complex daily experiences of youth living in urban peripheries. The students realized that with their lack of access to economic and cultural capital, the ITIT skills training programs would offer them only limited mobility and outcomes. The students protested that they were equally worthy and entitled to an education comparable to their more privileged peers, including learning about disciplines such as geography or math or English fluency. Their bid for an education pointed to the lack of acceptable educational institutions in their neighborhoods. They demanded an education instead of training and demanded the state and private actors accept responsibility for economic redistribution and justice. The youth asserted their equality with more privileged individuals. In the next section, I examine the complex subjectivities and identities invoked by hygiene training and how marginalized youth formed critical interpretations of the program's consumerist messages.

The Stylish Worker and Contested Subjectivities

Publicity images associated with the skills training program were those of the stylish youth workers and sanitized spaces. In the summer of 2016 at an India Skills event at the large state-owned exhibition complex Pragati Maidan, an all-male youth band performed the Bryan Adams classic *Summer of '69.* Yellow, purple, and neon strobe lights swirled above the crowd. Inside the exhibition halls, young people demonstrated their varied skills at computing, automobile technology, and hair cutting and make-up application. On this humid and dusty day in a Delhi summer, the contemporary décor, high-tech appliances, and air conditioning represented the cordoned-off and sanitized spaces normally off limits to the less privileged.

How did marginalized youth read the development messages on transforming themselves into global citizen-workers through acts of self-regulation and discipline that focused on consumption and hygiene? Did they concur with the transformative discourses related to soft skills training about transcending class and caste boundaries?

At the Khadar center, the walls were crowded with student-made posters. A poster for Modi's *Swach Bharat,* or Clean India, campaign showed a red-headed witch and a blonde girl on a "magic broom." The posters were collages of magazine advertisements for personal hygiene products such as teeth-whitening

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4. *Arnab Sen, personal communication, September 1, 2014.*
5. *Meeza Bano, personal communication, September 1, 2014.*

strips, shampoos, and hair oil. One poster featured a picture of Clinic Plus hair oil. The handwritten text next to it claimed, "Clinic Plus is a very good product. It gives us Vitamin E." A poster on telephone etiquette advised students to smile while speaking on the phone so the callers could "hear" the smile. The contemporary global worker must be able to speak English with a "neutral accent" and appear to be "clean." Soft skills classes that I observed at ITIT centers in Khadar usually began with the instructor asking students questions such as: Have you had a bath today? Are you shaved today? Did you shampoo your hair today? Are you wearing clean clothes? Did you iron your clothes? Are you wearing shoes? Classroom lectures and textbooks reminded students to bathe daily, to wash and iron their clothes even if they own only two sets, and not to wear slippers or walk barefoot. An English instructor at the Khadar center reminded the students that even if they think in Hindi, they must speak in English and practice it daily.

ITIT instructors emphasized that soft skills training would produce a global citizen and worker in the contemporary economy. The promise of these classes was one of economic, social, and geographical upward mobility. The soft skills classes emphasized consumption as the marker for becoming a global worker. Case studies included in project literature and publicity materials applauded giving up scruffy clothes and long hair in favor of a clean look and dressier clothes. For youth who participated in the Yojana program, the IT and soft skills training was allied to their search for better, "clean" jobs, as opposed to laboring in the manufacturing sector or even owning a small shop. Debnath Ganguly aspired to become a customer service associate at a large department store in a mall. He said, "You are in air conditioning all day. . . . My father is a daily wage laborer at a construction site in South Delhi. The mall is a different world."[6]

Mukesh Ambani's lessons in customer service and English led him to a job at a BPO that catered to customers of Bombay Suburban Electricity Supply Ltd., a company controlled by Reliance Infrastructure, India's largest private-sector power utility. For Ambani this job meant a significant departure from the urban periphery of Chauhan Mohalla, where daily wage labor was the dominant livelihood for most people. Ambani felt a sense of self-confidence when wearing his "formal dress and shave."

While the Skills India exhibition represented a carefree and stylish individual shaped by conspicuous consumption, the young students in the Yojana program struggled to take care of the necessities for themselves and their families. Ambani's job at the BPO helped his six family members remain in their one-room tenement. Several students said they joined the program to become the primary breadwinner for their extended families.

Classified as an urban village, Begumpur is considered an example of a *regularized slum,* where some tenement residents have obtained the legal right to live on plots of land allotted by the public Delhi Development Authority. Begumpur is also home to the Valmiki camp, which consists of a community of Dalits, who are at the bottom of India's caste hierarchy. Historically, the Valmikis worked at removing human excrement. In contemporary India they are municipal workers, responsible for working in and cleaning sewers, who continue to carry the stigma of untouchability. ITIT's emphasis on hygiene and cleanliness training reinforced upper-caste discourses on "purity," which masked historical and structural disempowerment of many Begumpur residents.

While youth were given lessons in personal hygiene and appearance, state and elite middle-class interests colluded to dispossess these marginalized citizens for the sake of "clearing up land space that had been dirtied by the squalor residing on the aforesaid encroached property" (Puri & Bhatia, 2009, p. 5). Khadar residents, who had been forcibly evicted from slums in central and south Delhi in order to beautify the city for the Commonwealth Games, were labeled as "squalor."

Vinay Shukla's family arrived in Khadar about 10 years ago, after they were forcibly evicted from the Alaknanda slums in one of Delhi's bitterly cold winters. The Alaknanda complex comprised apartment buildings that were considered prized real estate for Delhi's mobile middle class. The president of the Residents' Welfare Association of one of the complexes, Mandakini Enclave, compared slum residents to a contagious disease or infestation, saying they were "the worst affected area by the *jhuggi* [slum] dwellers" (Verma, 2003, p. 1). He urged that the vacant land be used for a sports center, a recreation club, or a swimming pool. As students pointed out, the resettlement to Khadar meant that family members lost their jobs because of the longer commute and lack of public transportation. Even to get to the nearest office complex in South Delhi, a person

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would have to spend 25% their income on bus fare. According to Shukla, "from the beginning, this way of feeling [bad] is instilled in us, and we know that we have to get a better identity."[7]

The emphasis on cleanliness and hygiene played out in complex ways in the students' lives. Narendra Modi's *Swach Bharat* ads exhorted urban poor communities to take charge of their hygiene and cleanliness. In return, ITIT students called on the state to assume responsibility for neighborhood sanitary services such as community toilets and municipal garbage collection. The road from the ITIT center to the Ali Vihar neighborhood in Khadar, where many students lived, was the dumping ground for South Delhi's waste. Twenty-year-old Aliya Khan had to look at these mounds of garbage every time she walked from her home to the center. She saw an inherent contradiction in being asked to be clean while her neighborhood was trashed by elite residents.

> I try to wear nice clothes and be clean, but what about our neighborhood? All the mountains of garbage that you see here are from the South Delhi neighborhoods where the rich people live. These mounds, in fact, overlook their apartment complex as you can see. What about our neighborhood? Shouldn't the government take equal responsibility for that?[8]

Several students said they were unable to cross class boundaries after completing the courses, despite the transformative training discourses related to IT and soft skills training that signified access to cultural capital. During an impassioned group discussion at the ITIT center in Khadar, Shukla said, "Our society is lower-class society. We can get to upper-class society by bringing change in our behavior, personality, and language." Toward the end of our discussion, I asked him to clarify what he meant by a "lower-class society." He said, "The government has put a stamp on us that we are not a good society." Many students, especially those who lived in JJ colony or Khadar's slum settlement, said they did not get interview calls because many employers discriminated against them based on their address. Several students changed their address to Madanpur Khadar Extension, a more desirable address.

Young people acted as critical and interpretive subjects of modernizing messages of the skills training program, which emphasized hygiene and cleanliness. Like their demand for education, the students realized that soft skills training was not enough. In fact, they juxtaposed it against the actions of corporations and the state, and they understood the irony of being asked to observe hygienic standards. The students enrolled in the training programs out of an economic necessity to provide for their families. They understood the programs' inability to open the door to economic and cultural capital, which forced them to remain outcasts and marginalized citizens pushed to the economic and cultural fringes. Their spatial marginalization was deeply connected to their economic and cultural marginalization.

Youth enter the world of global consumerism through their work in the IT-ITES industries, enticed by the promise of high salaries (Vasavi, 2008). However, as Chakravartty (2007) points out, while the worlds of IT-ITES industries blend, ITES work can include individuals with a more varied mix of class and caste identities. The ITIT training programs promise a more glamorous life marked by materiality and consumption. However, in pointing out the contradictions of this promise in their current lives and in calling for an education, marginalized urban youth called on the state and the corporation to meet their demand for inclusion in the global economy. Their claim asserted that merely mimicking Western, upper-class deportment in the form of good English and stylish clothes was not enough to breach the barriers to economic and social mobility. In this way, they also resisted the "categorical subordination" (Ferguson, 2006) of having to mimic and act in Western, upper-class ways that negated their structural conditions and that reinforced and heightened inequities. The students' call for a rounded education like their elite counterparts received asserted that they deserved inclusion and equity from both the state and the corporation. Lessons in spoken English and hygiene were represented as quick fixes to poverty, but obfuscated the structural disempowerment and familial, institutional, and linguistic privileges. Thus, ICT-led skills training reinforced marginalization based on class and caste positions for the youth of Khadar and Begumpur. In the "paradigmatic shift" in the new economy from women to youth, youth are trained in feminized forms of labor that involve a reorientation of deportment and the acquisition of

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7. *Vinay Shukla, personal communication, December 8, 2014.*
8. *Aliya Khan, personal communication, July 1, 2014.*

"feminine" skills of courtesy, care, and service, and attention to appearance and speech (Vasavi, 2008). As feminists call for critical responses to information societies (Gurumurthy, 2005), ethnographic work highlights the limited promise of the information economy by revealing the precariousness and vulnerabilities of work in the "new" economy.

Conclusion

In the last two decades, India has emerged as one of the prime exemplars of IT-led modernization in the Global South. Given its large numbers of young and unemployed youth, there is growing urgency among the state and private sectors to turn its numbers of unemployed youth into productive workers in the global economy. In the 1990s, the new group of global call center workers in India included mostly middle-class youth with a college education and sufficient fluency in English. In the last decade, skills training initiatives have focused on low-income youth who live in India's urban peripheries. The assumption behind skills training initiatives is that ICT and associated training will level out the economic and social inequities faced by marginalized communities. Skills training programs like Yojana thus seem to offer access to new-economy jobs in India.

While popular ICTD policy initiatives promote skills training projects, there is little research in the popular press or academic literature on how these projects are viewed by marginalized youth in the context of their lives. Examining such policy initiatives from "below" highlights contradictions in policy discourses from "above." Through my ethnographic work among students of the ICT-led training program run by the transnational corporation ITIT, I observe that the youth form critical subjects for these projects. Their experiences highlight contradictions and shortcomings of the modernization program.

My research demonstrates that although marginalized youth realize that skills training programs lead to employment, they continue to struggle to claim a "general education." In the context of the lack of quality, public education institutions in Delhi's urban peripheries, the students treat their time at ITIT as the equivalent to earning a college education, demanding more academic subjects and English lessons from their instructors. These youth recognize that their lack of access to institutional and cultural capital greatly disadvantages them. Their insistence on a conventional education means they expect an education comparable to that of the elite classes and accountability from the institutional actors.

The skills training program aimed to produce the modern pink-collar worker who would be invested in self-presentation through conspicuous consumption. The critical readings of the youth pointed to the complexities of such training discourses. Students said they appreciated clean work environments and that their improved appearance fostered pleasure in their new identities as workers in the global economy in India. On the other hand, young people pointed to the contradictions of the training discourse that centered on personal hygiene and appearance Their experiences indicated their motivation to participate in training programs to provide the necessities for their families, rather than to emerge as a stylish IT worker. Family histories of eviction highlighted the contested experiences of being trained to be hygienic in the political-spatial contexts of a world-class city.

Multi-sited ethnography is vital in examining the daily experiences of low-income youth in Delhi's urban peripheries. This study is sited in the particular histories of Delhi's Khadar and Begumpur slums that shape the youths' experiences with ICTD initiatives. This study would benefit from longitudinal research that follows the youth participants over a span of years to track their employment and labor histories and evolving subjectivities. Ethnographic work, however, allows us to examine the complexity of policy initiatives in relation to daily lives through close attention to the narratives of urban poor communities that highlight dissonances and ruptures in the global information society. ∎

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